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ABSTRACT

A project has been designed to identify how a non-metropolitan community consolidates and develops sustainable social and economic activity. For many authors, the political position reiterating vocational education and training (VET) as the pivotal contributor to building national economic sustainability is framed in terms of human capital imperatives, economic rationalism, and corporate managerialism. Contemporary research on VET's value or outcomes often focuses on industry outcomes or particular activity rather than value to its wider community. The project would examine whether models of vocational provision constructed to service one sector, as opposed to mutualities of sectors, may mitigate against attempts by non-metropolitan communities to reposition themselves economically and socially in an increasingly globalized economy. A more inclusive definition of VET may be appropriate to more accurately describe the true value of VET activity and its benefits to communities in their quest for economic and social sustainability. The research method combines the focused interview process with open-ended questions. The sample consists of two strata: those employed in 17 industry groupings delineated for benchmarking performance in VET in Australia and those affiliated with community groupings operating in the study community. (Contains 56 references.) (YLB)

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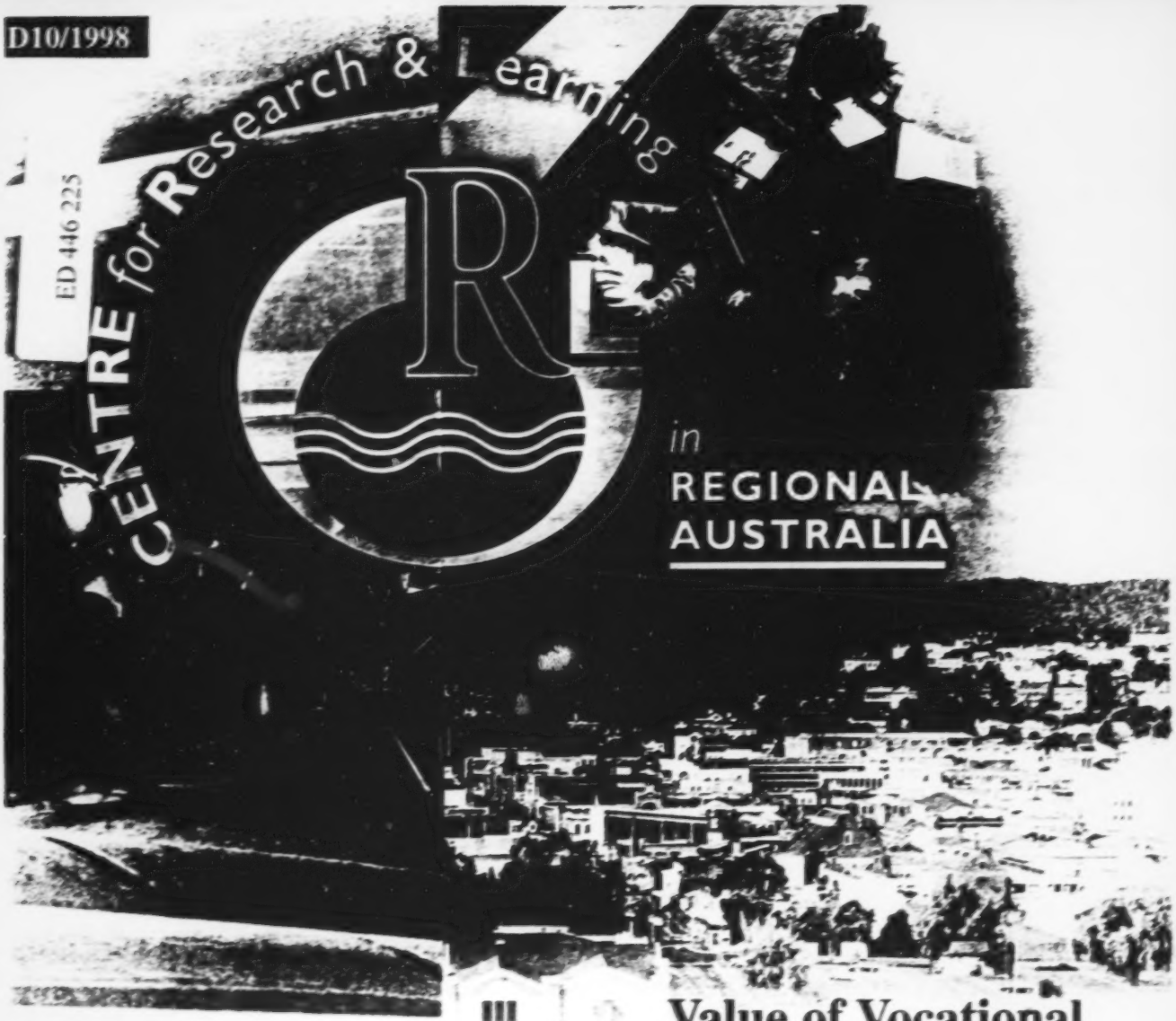

Value of Vocational Education and Training in a Non-metropolitan Community

WJ Toms, Ian Falk & Sue Kilpatrick

Discussion Paper D10/1998

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VALUE OF VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN A NON-METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY

(PROJECT SUMMARY)

Prepared for NCVER Training Research Conference/Workshop
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Project Summary

This project is being undertaken on behalf of the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) by the Centre for Research and Learning in Regional Australia, University of Tasmania and will explore the value of Vocational Education and Training (VET) in a non-metropolitan community.

Contemporary research on the value or outcomes of VET often focuses on industry outcomes or particular activity rather than focusing on its value to its wider community. This research will examine whether models of vocational provision constructed to service one sector, as opposed to mutualities of sectors, may mitigate against attempts by non-metropolitan communities in Australia to reposition themselves economically and socially in an increasingly globalized economy. If this is the case a more inclusive definition of VET may be appropriate so as to more accurately describe the true value of VET activity and its benefits to communities in their quest for economic and social sustainability.

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Objectives of the Project

A recent literature review by Kilpatrick and Bell (1998, p. 4) pertaining to non-metropolitan Australia places some perspective on social and economic aspects of these communities. They find:

> Rural people are less likely to have post school qualifications, participate in post-school education and training ... be an employee, be a professional and work in manufacturing, property and business or finance or insurance. They are more likely to have left school early, be unemployed or out of the labour force, work in small business, be self employed or an employer, be a labourer or other low skilled occupation.

These findings, although providing a snapshot of the non-metropolitan population, largely reflect research dominated by 'the economic' and the culture and structure of the labour market orientation by the VET system in Australia. Butler and Lawrence (1996, p. 21) highlight the concern of non-metropolitan communities with their long-term survival, both economically and socially.

In a recent paper, Lawrence (1997, p. 216) posits that the integrity of the mutuality of economic, social and cultural features on non-metropolitan communities must be recognised and incorporated into policy initiatives.

Uncertainties faced by non-metropolitan communities in Australia are underscored by a recent UNESCO conference (July 1997). A section, *Adult learning and the changing world of work*, states in part:

> The changing world of work is a multifaceted issue of enormous concern and relevance to adult learning. ... The right to work, the opportunity for employment and the responsibility to contribute, at all ages of life, to the development and well being of one's society are issues which adult learning must address. (Adult Education: The Hamburg Declaration, The Agenda for the Future 1997, p. 34)

Given that VET is now a policy institution which has set itself the pivotal role of contributing to building national economic sustainability, establishment of parameters surrounding the appropriateness of current VET delivery in non-metropolitan communities is necessary.

The primary objective of this project is to identify how a non-metropolitan community consolidates and develops sustainable social and economic activity. The project examines the respective contributions of schooling, post school education and training, learning at work and learning outside of work in relation to social and economic activity.

The project also canvasses some possible frameworks for valuing the respective contributions of schooling, post school education and training, learning at work and learning outside of work in a non-metropolitan community.

Preliminary discussion

Education and training policy have become key elements in the process of change in the world economy (Carnoy 1996, p. 271). Ball (1992, p. 71) refers to such policies and associated processes as 'new vocationalism'. This new vocationalism has become an industry in its own right in a number of OECD countries spawning numerous policy initiatives, and programs in its support (Ball 1992, p. 75). Childs and Wagner (1998, p. 1) describe a similar process in Australia where the Vocational Education and Training sector (commonly referred to as the VET sector) has developed its own institutions, beliefs, cultures, languages and practices.

Ball (1992, p. 74) describes the new vocationalism as being arranged around a set of polarities, of problems and solutions. The most persuasive of these polarities is that lack of skills in a workforce will result in economic loss. The converse is to harness the VET sector to better meet the long-term objectives of the economy. As a result of policies that support the new vocationalism, VET in Australia has been significantly repositioned through policy and resultant structural changes to act as a key factor in enhancing economic growth.

The political position for such an economic position is outlined in the 1987 budgetary paper *Skills Formation in Australia* (Dawkins & Holding 1987). This paper illustrates the role that education, particularly the vocational sphere, would take in developing a highly trained workforce that would ensure Australia's economic future in a globalized economy. Statements such as:

> The Government is determined that our education and training systems should play an active role in responding to the major economic challenges now facing Australia. (1987, p. iii)

and,

> Increase the productivity of our education and training resources, and evaluate the outputs achieved from the use of those resources. (1987, p. iv)

highlight two separate but related concepts. First, the premise that Australia is in danger of being left behind in a global economy and therefore our education and training systems need to be realigned to this aim. Second, that evaluation of education and training is to be tied to quantitative measures of output for corresponding input of funds, which heralds in a utilitarian and market approach to VET.

Structural changes following this budget paper advanced this economic and market approach to VET. Infrastructures at both federal and state level implemented change, program delivery was defined in terms of markets in order to constrain public expenditure, and competency-based training became the preferred delivery methodology.

Policy and structural changes, mainly driven by competition policy, have continued to shape the Australian VET sector on the premise that training,

especially training in workplaces, will increase productivity. Statements such as those from Minister Kemp that, 'Vocational education has a crucial role to play in the Government's vision to develop Australia as a society able to adapt flexibly and dynamically to the changes of a highly competitive global economy' [Contained in address 1997] continue to reinforce VET's economic role.

Conceptual background

For a number of authors (Pusey 1992; Marginson 1993; Symes 1995) the political position for reiterating VET as the pivotal contributor to building national economic sustainability is framed in terms of human capital imperatives, economic rationalism, and corporate managerialism. The concept of human capital has a long history and has been influential in education policy formation since the 1960s (Marginson 1993, pp. 31-34; Maglen et al. 1994, p. 152). The late 1980s witnessed a renewed interest in human capital primarily led by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) based on education as 'the source of flexibility and responsiveness in relation to technological and social change' (Marginson 1993, p. 48). Such sentiments were fuelled by the Economic Planning and Advisory Council (EPAC) in its 1986 report when it argued that there was a qualitative deficiency in Australia's skill base, when compared with member countries, that could be improved through the educational system (EPAC 1986, pp. 1-32).

The theoretical base of human capital espoused by OECD and EPAC is closely aligned to the neo-classical school of thought which views all behaviour as being based on the self interest of individuals operating in freely competitive markets. The key premise is the capacity of individuals to invent and embrace technological change as the uptake of technological change is seen as essential for economic growth (Manne 1992, p. 53; Harrold 1993, p. 50).

Australia drew heavily on the OECD to both frame and justify its key policy ideas for education and training (Vickers 1995, p. 110). The abolition of the School's Commission and the amalgamation of education and labour portfolios into the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) essentially reconstructed the framework of VET as 'human capital'. John Dawkins, the then minister for DEET went so far as to pre-suppose that human capital was a given in any discussion about education and training:

> ... the vital question is not whether education and training are a factor in economic growth and performance, but rather what needs to be done to improve their provision, by what means, in which directions, and where responsibilities for action should lie. (Dawkins, OECD 1989, p. 11)

Although there are clear political and economic ideological determinants driving human capital theory (see Marginson 1993, pp. 34-37) considerable research also has accompanied this, particularly in relation to its ability to enhance technological change (see Carnoy 1996, pp. 271-272). Empiric links are quantitative in nature and based on hypotheses that endeavour to find statistical equations which demonstrate education as an investment in capital.

The concept of human capital, however, remains controversial and has not gone uncontested either politically or methodologically (Schuller and Field, forthcoming 1998).

There is a growing field of literature that is questioning the direction and relevance of factors driving VET policy in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom (for example, see respectively Watkins 1994; Wexler 1994; Hyland 1996). In terms of the empirical claims of human capital theory, there is significant dissonance. Maglen et al. (1994, pp. 152-153) identify major concerns, namely the measures used in research that establish causal relationships between human capital and economic outcomes, and differences between particular forms of training and the growth of human capital. Klees (1991, p. 725) in a review of research surrounding human capital, found that researchers had failed to confront major questions on which research hypotheses were based. His major criticism is that there are too many variables surrounding delivery and outcomes from education and training that cannot be adequately described or measured. Maglen et al. (1994, p. 180) provide a more balanced view from their review of human capital literature. They find that at the macro level causal relationships between education and economic growth are largely inconclusive. However, at the micro level of individuals and firms, there is a relationship between 'high quality and relevant education and training' and successful individuals and enterprises.

The reliance on human capital theory for both policy direction and evaluation of the economic impact of training within the VET sector in Australia is problematic as there are, as pointed out by Maglen and Hopkins, (1998, p. 3) serious reservations concerning both the theoretical and empirical base of such direction. Australia's reliance on comparative studies with other OECD countries is also debatable. Maglen et al. (1994, pp. 180-181) view investment in education, based on comparisons between occupations, industries and countries, as not necessarily or inevitably leading to an increase of Australia's productive capacity.

The OECD on the other hand (OECD Economic Surveys 1996-1997) still holds firm on the view that investment in training leads to improved economic performance. The 1996/7 review also takes the view that public expenditure can still be 'rationalised on efficiency and equity grounds' (p. 155) and advocates the expansion of internal training markets and self funding of training via vouchers (p. 157). Such policy advice is still very much grounded in human capital theory that advances the notion of the self-interest of individuals operating in competitive markets.

Over recent years there has been a 'pervasive influence of economics and the economy on educational policy and politics' (Smart 1992, p. 43). Economic rationalism has become the dominant dynamic of change with corporate language and practices being increasingly applied to VET provision. Bartlett (1991, p. 12) refers to this process as 'corporate federalism' where the economic takes on a 'metapolicy status'. He further argues that this metapolicy

is grounded in discourses drawn from human capital, economic rationalism and corporate managerialism (Bartlett 1991, p. 12).

Pusey (1992, p. 171) and Marginson (1993, p. 56) identify three broad components of economic rationalism. First, there is a pre-occupation with market forces. Second, there is a fixation on economic objectives that result in education being uncoupled from its socio-cultural context and viewed as a branch of economics. Third, there is a systems logic that quantifies activity as inputs and outputs. The dominant style of management within an economic rationalist paradigm is corporate managerialism. This form of management replaces social policy objectives with the economic (Yeatman 1991, in Marginson 1993, p. 57), its premise being that 'better management' will improve the economy and in doing so will cure social ills (Boston 1991, p. 9).

Central features of corporate managerialism are outlined by Boston (1991, pp. 9-10). These include: an emphasis on management to meet quantifiable outputs and set performance objectives; devolution of responsibility but with strict reporting mechanisms; privatisation and commercialisation; a stress on cost cutting and changed employment conditions that favour contract employment and wages tied to productivity.

Economic rationalism and corporate managerialism as applied to VET, as with human capital theory, are not without critics (see Boston 1991; Pusey 1992; Marginson 1993; Codd 1995). A major theme of these criticisms is that VET is now viewed solely as an economic utility; educational services are 'products' in a vocational marketplace. Managerialism is seen to act as a 'system of normalising judgement' (Marginson 1993, p. 67) that sets the parameters for policy, curriculum and delivery; only those activities that are seen to advance the economic are promoted as worthwhile. Examples of such promotion include: commercialisation and competitive bidding; performance indicators tied to economics; program budgeting; conformity to set curricula and delivery (for example, competency-based training); and qualitative measures of evaluation with an emphasis on comparative data.

The unifying theme of human capital theory, economic rationalism and corporate managerialism is that they are the conceptual and structural framework for economising VET in Australia. Despite its critics, human capital theory provides a persuasive analytical notion regarding the production function relationship for VET policy. Economic rationalism and corporate managerialism provide the framework and processes which justify an emphasis on quantifying inputs and outputs of VET delivery. The result is that current interpretation of VET activity is narrowed to addressing and supporting its production function.

This interpretation of VET is exemplified through the Performance Committee of ANTA. This committee reports on key performance measures on a national basis with results published in an annual report. The report's function is to 'provide a global picture of performance of the [VET] sector in relation to input, activities, outputs and outcomes' (Bench Marking VET 1996, 1997, p. 1). For statistical purposes Australian industry is divided into seventeen

industry groupings. Economic performance of industry groups, together with labour market projections for each, is a determinant of future training effort. On the delivery side much use is made of comparative data between states, a mechanism consistent with corporate managerialism.

Achievement and other statistical data within the report are couched in terms of numbers of students, dollars expended for hours of training delivered, module completion rates by students, composition of providers and satisfaction surveys of employers and students are set against a labour market context for VET. This form of systems reporting has been termed 'model building' by Pusey (1992, pp. 176-179). For Pusey, model building is managerialistic in nature, its prime strategy being the maintenance of strict control over products, markets and performance. The model determines what counts as substance and neutralises other contexts. For Anderson (1998, p. 1) policy relating to VET in Australia over recent years has:

> ... instigated a dual process of institutional redesign and cultural renorming that has progressively transformed the material conditions and social relations that shape the nature of production, distribution and consumption process in VET.

One aspect of this model building has been the development of the VET 'training market'. Robinson (1998, p. 7) posits that the training market has become the 'dominant model for reframing the relationship between skills supply and demand, and for re-engineering the structure, culture and operations of the VET sector'. Robinson further argues that this market development challenges long-standing assumptions about the nature and purposes of VET.

Critics of the VET training market (see Anderson 1998; Robinson 1998) point to an apparent failure of the market to address the social nature of work and of society. Markets, by their nature are exclusionary. Access and equity is one aspect of concern, as is possible under-investment in training areas of low demand. Other 'learning' activities that do not fit the seventeen industry groups are also under threat. Schuller and Field (forthcoming 1998, p. 4) emphasise that activities that cannot show a visible, and quick, return will find difficulty in being included as part of an accountancy driven model. They further argue that educational consumption is much wider than a human capital model as such a model is 'based only on a partial picture of economic activity' and, ignores what they term 'spillover' or 'transfer of learning from one learning domain to another'.

Childs and Wagner (1998, p. 11) point to other limiting factors and posit that:

> Cost benefit analysis models used by the VET sector continue to fail to include such factors as regional economic well-being, social cohesion and the cost benefit to communities of enterprise development: all significant issues when analysing cost-benefits within a social model of economics.

They further state that:

> VET orthodoxy ... does not include modelling that identifies the relationships between enterprises and the communities within which they are located.

Billett et al. (1997) in a report to the Office of Training and Further Education, Victoria, view mutualities of relationships among individuals, enterprises, communities (and regions) and industry as being important in overcoming ideologically driven policy making. For Billett et al. (1997, pp. 3 and 6) current VET responsiveness premised on individuals as economic units in a competitive environment does not encourage co-operation and mutuality. Further, the current centralised market approach is not sensitive enough to cater for localised community needs.

A further aspect that is neglected in the current VET model is the concept of lifelong learning. The current focus on prescriptive national curricula, standards and delivery methodology do not adequately address either the social needs of individuals or particular communities. The National Institute of Economic Review (1991, p. 7) clearly makes the point that educational strategies must involve both economic and social values.

They state:

> We would add that the choice of national strategy involves social as well as economic values. It would be socially as well as economically damaging to neglect the training of the population at large.

This interest in lifelong learning has also been subject of comment from both OECD (Lifelong Learning for All, 1996) and the Australian Board of Employment Education and Training (NBEET) in the report *Lifelong Learning – Key Issues* (1996) commissioned by the then minister for Employment Education and Training.

The OECD (1996, p. 29) report, although couched in human capital terms, acknowledges that deepening links between the economy and the training sector raises the question of how training systems can be restructured to serve economic needs but at the same time meet social needs. They state that:

> One of the major policy questions that emerges is whether the trends described here [in relation to the economising of training] contain risks for social cohesion and democratic foundations. (OECD 1996, p. 29)

The OECD report (1996, p. 72) also raises a question pertinent to Australia:

> The challenges clearly go beyond the mere noting of a growing demand for education and training among learners of all ages, and an increase in diversity of providers. There is a need for a different quality and content of education, which signals a generic and pragmatic shift from education to learning.
>
> What is needed, above all, is that the reforms are planned as part of a coherent blueprint for change – a new organising framework for the long-term development of learning societies.

The Australian report is rather utilitarian in its solutions to lifelong learning. Its context remains fixed in sectors (schooling, higher education, VET and adult and community) with an emphasis on issues relating to assessment, delivery and access. It does, however, refer to a 'learning community' (NBEET 1996, p. 7) which recognizes that employment is only one part of life and that the focus on VET may be 'too narrow and that the definition of skills should be broadened'.

Communities in this context become places where learning is 'part of the social fabric'.

Smith and Herbert (1997, pp. 8-11) argue that Australia should put philosophical starting points and differences aside and focus on contexts that consider which factors contribute to forming a 'civil society'. They make the point that focusing on one aspect of society, the economic, excludes or marginalises other sectors. Hyland (1997, p. 99) comments that emphasis on the economic has led to one-dimensional VET systems in Australia and the United Kingdom. This view is supported by commentators from ANTA who view the value of VET as having one distinct boundary, 'industry'. For example, Moran (1995, p. 24) argues that the essence of the VET sector is its relationship with industry and that ANTA's mandate is clear; it must 'reflect industry's needs and priorities'.

Falk (1998, pp. 2 and 3) suggests that such a 'narrow and value laden gaze' contributes to 'unintended omissions in VET provision' and contends that a policy mis-match occurs which disenfranchises segments of the population. Given that 'learning' and 'community' are key factors in the development of social as well as economic sustainability, Lawrence's comment that:

> The concept of 'community' contained within the current, market driven, VET system is at odds in significant ways from the more collective approach to community found in literature on and from regional communities. (1997, p. 209)

is pertinent to any redefinition of VET.

Butler and Lawrence (1996, p. 21) highlight the concern that non-metropolitan communities have regarding their long-term economic and social survival. Lawrence (1997, p. 216) maintains that notions of economic and social sustainability will be difficult to attain if the concept of community remains problematic. For Lawrence, the integrity of the mutuality of economic, social and cultural features of non-metropolitan communities must be recognized and incorporated into policy initiatives.

Contemporary, on-going research, (for example, Harrison & Falk 1998) indicates that even though non-metropolitan communities are hard pressed by economic circumstances they can respond positively. Communities such as 'Rivertown' (a pseudonym) although beset by high unemployment and shrinking community resources such as financial institutions, medical practitioners and the like, have an underlying 'community spirit' (Harrison and Falk 1998, p. 1). This community spirit is fuelled by networks which Harrison and Falk believe may provide the necessary means for like communities to acquire a synergy that will ultimately allow them to develop economic and social stability.

Further to NBEET's concept of a 'learning community', Harrison and Falk's hypothesis—that the quality and quantity (productivity) of the interactivity in non-metropolitan communities informs the development of indicators for learning communities—supports a view emerging in the literature that the limited scope of prevailing measures of the value of VET, particularly in non-

metropolitan communities, is not capturing or supporting significant learning that is taking place in these communities.

For Falk (1998, p. 4) non-metropolitan communities need to move past the 'baseline' so as to build a capacity to 'be responsive – to react and respond to change, and to have a vision that they believe is realistic and worth striving for'. Kilpatrick, Bell and Falk (1998, p. 30) propose that where communities acquire this collective viewpoint, learning becomes a continuous process which enables communities to increase their capacity to produce favourable social and economic outcomes. Analyses of recent research (Falk & Harrison 1998; Kilpatrick et al. 1998) indicates that there are interactions of networks which establish commitment and shared values operating within rural communities, the result of these interactions is "something that could be called social capital".

Social capital

The term 'social capital' has gained currency (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1993; Cox 1995; Flora et al. 1996; Onyx & Bullen 1997) as a means to describe these qualitative factors of social organization. The literature contains a number of definitions of social capital. Putnam's (1993, p. 35) definition, however, encapsulates key characteristics found in the literature. He describes social capital as, 'features of social organization such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'. Kilpatrick et al. (1998, p. 2) supply a further definition that describes social capital as a process. They describe social capital as, 'the oil which lubricates social processes so as to enhance the outcomes of those processes'.

Flora et al. (1996, p. 57) note that any approach to researching social capital should place more emphasis on process rather than specific material outcome. They further note (p. 58) that state sponsored programs place too much reliance on what is easily measured at the expense of understanding community interrelations and the impact these programs have on these interrelations. As indicated by Billett et al. (1997), broadly defined programs currently delivered by VET do not take into account location-specific action for change and do not address mutualities that may, or could, enhance capacity building. Flora et al. (1996, pp. 58-59) posit that provision of programs such as VET, need to be 'contextualized' to meet desired community outcomes.

Social capital is also concerned with capital accumulation. Putnam (1993, pp. 35 and 37), as a result of a substantial longitudinal study, concluded that social capital is a 'precondition for economic development' as it, 'enhances the benefits of investment in physical and human capital'. This latter feature has important implications for a VET system predicated on the development of human capital as a means to create capital accumulation and on a market driven system that tends to ignore both the historical and contemporary fabric of communities. Social capital is not an isolated civic phenomenon but is inextricably bound with both social and economic goals.

Flora et al. (1996, p. 62) contend that it is important that the capacity of programs initiated and controlled by the state be mapped in terms of social capital indicators. This mapping should, however, be oriented towards 'outcomes' or 'larger goals' rather to an 'input/outputs' model in which ratios can be converted to quantitative data and ultimately to dollars. For a community to understand the value of current assets, in our case VET provision, this asset must be mapped against its outcomes for social capital capacity building in order for it to be reworked to meet the collective needs of that community.

Recent research relating to social capital (Flora et al. 1996; Harrison & Falk 1997; Onyx & Butler 1997; Topolsky 1997; Falk & Harrison 1998; Kilpatrick et al. 1998) indicates that there are models of social capital indicators that can be empirically measured. Topolsky (1997, pp. 5-7) outlines three clusters of measurable outcomes: people outcomes, purpose outcomes and performance outcomes. Topolsky (1997, pp. 5-6) divides people outcomes into three sub-indicators: expanding diverse inclusive participation, expanding a leadership base, and strengthened individual skills. The sub-indicators are not independent but mutual for, as suggested by Onyx and Bullen (1997, p. 5), generation of social capital is not dependent on individuals alone but on an informed mutuality. Putnam (1993), Flora et al. (1996) and Harrison and Falk (1997) refer to these people mutualities as networks. Kilpatrick et al. (1998, p. 2) describe the process of these mutualities or networks as 'interactions between individuals, between individuals and groups and between groups of groups'.

Flora et al. (1996, pp. 67-68) view networks as a key mechanism through which Putnam's characteristics of trust and legitimacy (norms) are established. A recent study by Onyx and Bullen (1997) supports this view. They found that participation within local community organizations, personal proactivity in a social context and feelings of trust appeared to define aspects of social capital.

Models of social capital support the central tenet of life-long learning as described by OECD (1996). The human factor has again become important, not only from a human capital theoretical viewpoint, but from a social viewpoint. Personal learning and social cohesion are seen as ways of reversing the social polarisation that has occurred under economic rationalism. The 'central ambition' for OECD countries is now 'life-long learning for all' as it 'contributes to an array of goals rather than to a single aim' (OECD 1996, p. 87).

Methodology

Research methods

The choice of research methods is based on assumptions inherent in the methodological approach (Minichiello et al. 1996, p. 3). As the approach in this research is based on qualitative assumptions the techniques used is consistent with this approach.

Literature (Smith 1975; Lincoln & Guba 1985; Brenner et al. 1987; Patton 1990; Minichiello et al. 1996; Maykut & Morehouse 1997; Babbie 1998) indicates that interviews are an appropriate mechanism for data collection within a qualitative research framework. For Brenner et al. (1987, p. 3) the central value of the interview is that 'it allows both parties to explore the meaning of the questions and answers involved'. Misunderstandings are kept to a minimum and the data collected is extensive. For Minichiello et al. (1996, p. 10) interviewing is a methodological approach that does not rely on prescriptive requirements of quantitative methodologies.

The use of a focused interview or semi-structured interview is an appropriate technique for qualitative research (Holloway & Wheeler 1996, p. 55; Minichiello et al. 1996, p. 68). Focused interviewing overcomes many of the disadvantages of the interview process. Holloway and Wheeler (1996, pp. 55-56) describe the semi-structured or focused interview as being guided by an interview guide that focuses on the issues to be covered. The guide is a series of broad questions (Maykut & Morehouse 1997, p. 83) that ensures that basically the same information is obtained from all informants (Patton 1990, p. 283; Holloway & Wheeler 1996, p. 55). The use of a guide, as opposed to a structured interview schedule, or structured questionnaire commonly used in surveys, allows for re-sequencing of the interview in line with the flow of discussion (Holloway & Wheeler 1996, p. 55). For Patton (1990, p. 283) the guide 'helps make interviewing across a number of different people more systematic and comprehensive' and, at the same time, 'keeps interactions focused but allows individual perspectives and experiences to emerge. In the same vein, Brenner et al. (1987, p. 6) suggest that interview guides governing interviews address issues of reliability and validity in that guides result in adequate answers that allow for maximum comparisons between respondents and reduce the likelihood of interviewer bias distorting responses.

For our purposes we have combined the focused interview process with open-ended questions relating to the research question, together with standard prompts, as the major research method. As two interviewers are used, the guide allows each interviewer to focus on issues to be covered and to collect similar information from each participant in a semi-planned sequence (Holloway & Wheeler 1996, pp. 55-56; Kumar 1996, p. 109). These mechanisms ensure comparability of data, allow for individual perspective and, at the same time, contain each interview to the research topic being explored (Holloway & Wheeler 1996, p. 56). For Patton (1990, p. 285) standardising questions also overcomes potential problems with legitimacy and credibility of qualitative data. The approach also provides the means for content analysis being based on consistent data collection.

Clarification of open-ended questions through the use of neutral probes is consistent with this question type (Frey & Oishi 1995, p. 73) as the use of probes 'deepens the response to a question, to increase the richness of data being obtained' (Patton 1990, p. 324). Being mindful of this, the interview guide contains comprehensive probes which are, as recommended by Smith, (1975, p. 179) contained in parentheses for easy recognition by the interviewer.

The use of probes is particularly useful in three questions that aim to qualify how respondents use their knowledge and skills. For these questions we also use a reference point as recommended by Frey & Oishi (1995, p. 88) to guide respondent's thinking through time. In our case a separate circle is used as a reference to approximate, in each respondent's own representation, how skills and knowledge are used in three separate scenarios. As there are five areas to complete and discuss a visual aid is used to help respondent's recall (Frey & Oishi 1995, p. 91).

Qualitative thematic analysis aims to capture the richness and complexity of respondent responses. Following Patton, (1990, pp. 347-348) to gain the most from interviews each is audio recorded and supplemented with notes. Minichiello et al. (1996, p. 215) note that such notes add value to the tape as they provide information on the setting, the respondent and reflections on methodological issues as the research proceeds.

Following Maykut and Morehouse's procedure (1997, pp. 83-85) ethical clearance was obtained, and a description of the project developed for participant information together with a permission to tape the interview. The focus interview was trialed on eight respondents who were representative of the sample population (Babbie 1998, p. 159). Notes were taken during interviews and questions were asked of trial respondents at the completion of each interview. In all, five revisions were made to the focus interview questions guide and prompts.

The setting

The concept of 'community' is nebulous. As Kenny (1994, p. 32) explains, the term community 'is burdened with a wide range of definitions and understandings'. From a research perspective the various representations of community can make generalisations problematic as the sample used in a study will have inferred characteristics as implied by the theoretical population of the study (Smith 1975, p. 105; Kenny 1994, p. 32).

This project employs the concept of community as a physical location that has established boundaries (Kenny 1994, p. 32 after Wild 1981, p. 14). Davidson and Lees (1993, in McClinton & Pawar 1997, p. 39) define populations over 100,000 as metropolitan, 10,000 or more as rural and under 10,000 as remote. For the purposes of this study we will utilise a definition of metropolitan as populations over 100,000 with population centres under this being non-metropolitan.

Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (1996 Census, data from Web Site 27/02/98) indicates that there are seventy-eight centres with populations between 10,000 and 30,000. We take these centres to be a consensually imposed definition of each community. Each possesses an institutionally secure name with delineated boundaries. Smith (1975, p. 112) refers to these as 'community[ies] of limited liability'. These communities form a stratified group of typical centres as delineated by ABS statistics (after Smith

1975, p. 122). The community chosen for this project is regarded as typical of the stratified group.

Criteria for selection of the site included: non-reliance on any one major industry grouping (as delineated by ANTA for benchmarking performance) for its economic base as this may have skewed data, a demographic spread of population by gender and age, a relatively stable population and an ongoing presence of VET. The community has been well serviced by VET through permanent TAFE and Adult Education facilities, and more recently by private providers. The latter factors were seen to provide a relative stability that would mediate towards eliciting information regarding the longer-term contribution of VET to the community.

Sampling construct

The construct for sampling in this project is based on a purposive model. Patton (1990, p. 169) states:

> The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research.

In purposeful sampling the sample, by definition, is representative of the research questions (Patton 1990, p. 177). Participants are selected for inclusion 'based on the possibility that each participant will expand the variability of the sample' (Maykut & Morehouse 1997, p. 45). In contrast, random sampling relies on a large sample size to gain variability. As this research is interested in the inter-relatedness of persons in the selected community with their learning experiences a sample has been constructed that represents two major sub-groups within the community. To ensure against bias, a problem delineated by Smith, (1975, p. 115) two differing procedures were used to gain the sample, nominations and systematic sampling. Both procedures are consistent with purposeful sampling (Smith 1975, p. 118, Patton 1990, p. 176).

The sample consists of two strata. First, those who are employed in the seventeen industry groupings delineated by ANTA for benchmarking performance in VET within Australia (ANTA 1997, p. 7). Second, those affiliated with community groupings that currently operate within the community chosen for study (City Council Publication, [for selected community] December 1997). Community groupings were derived from broad area of interest, for instance, those organisations involved in art and craft and needlework were classed as one sub-group for sampling purposes. Table 1 delineates sample groups for both industry and community.

Table 1: Sample groups, industry and community

ANTA Industry Sectors	Community Sub-groups
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	Animal welfare
Agriculture, fishing and forestry	Business trade or professional
Communication services	Church related
Construction	Community media/information
Cultural and recreational services	Conservation, environmental or heritage
Education	Drama, music, art, dance and literary
Electricity, gas and water supply	Ethnic organisation
Finance and insurance	Gardening, parks and gardens
Government administration and defence	Hobby, craft, photography
Health and community services	Rural or farm
Manufacturing	Self-help, support and advocacy
Mining	Service club or organisation
Personal and other services	Sporting club
Property and business services	Tourism related
Retail trade	Pensioner and retirement
Transport and storage	Lodges
Wholesale trade	Political parties
	Vehicle and motorcycle clubs

Sampling procedure

Participants from industry groupings were chosen using a modified expert choice sampling procedure. This approach involves locating information-rich cases 'typical' or 'representative' of the population (Smith 1975, p. 118; Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 201). In our case the Community Development Officer employed by the City Council of the selected site nominated names for each of the seventeen industry groupings. These people were then contacted by telephone and asked if they wished to participate or if they could provide contacts for other possible informants. This latter procedure, chaining, is consistent with purposeful sampling (Smith 1975, p. 118; Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 202; Patton 1990, p. 176).

Procedure of selection of a sample from community groups followed Babbie (1998, pp. 214-215). Babbie, in a discussion of sampling procedures, states that systematic sampling is slightly more accurate, and is a superior procedure to random sampling.

To ensure an adequate sample two organizations within each sub-group were targeted for possible participation in the study. The procedure used follows that described by Smith (1975, pp. 121-122) and Babbie (1998 pp. 214-215). Where the number of organisations in any one sub-group is greater than two

(>2), systematic sampling with a random start is used to choose two organizations from each sub-group. To ensure against bias, the lists for each grouping are randomly arranged before sampling and the first element chosen at random. Thereafter, every *k*th element is chosen as a contact.

The sampling ratio varied for each group as the numbers in each group ranged from 1-68. Where there are two only organizations within a group both are chosen, where there is only one that one is included to maintain representation. The danger of hitting a 'cycle' or 'periodic cycle' is not apparent in this sample as there is no ordering within the original groupings and the lists are not large enough to warrant different random starts (see Smith 1975, pp. 121-122; Babbie 1998, pp. 214-214).

Sample size

Patton (1990, p. 184) states that there are no rules for sample size in qualitative research, the emphasis of purposive sampling being on information-rich cases. 'Sampling is based on informational, not statistical, considerations. Its purpose is to maximise information' (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 202). For Patton, validity and meaningfulness of purposeful sampling lie more with the insights generated by inquiry than on sample size (Patton, 1990, p. 185).

Although Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 201) express the notion that no prior specification of sample number is required, Patton (1990, p. 186) advises researchers to specify 'minimum samples' based on reasonable coverage of the phenomenon to be studied. For this research there is a minimum sample of fifty-two respondents, two from each industry group and one from each community sub-group. Such a sample is diverse enough to capture high quality and detailed information on each case so that uniqueness as well as shared patterns that may emerge are documented (Patton 1990, p. 172).

Data analysis

This study employs the software program NUD*IST to analyse transcribed data from audio-tapes of each interview. NUD*IST allows researchers to index data in a hierarchical tree structure of categories and sub-categories, apply sets of operations, retrieve sections of data, ask questions of the data and develop propositions from the data (Minichiello et al. 1995, p. 271 and p. 289). Data obtained from diagrammatic responses is to be manually analysed.

Conduct of research

The project will initially be over a one-year period.

Phase one: March-June 1998:

- Developing a research proposal.
- Selection of a community for research and familiarisation with the locale of the study (demographics, industries, advertised community groups, VET providers).
- Seeking ethical approval, developing and trialing a semi-structured interview.
- A detailed review of literature, policy documents and discussion papers pertaining to the study.
- Developing mechanisms to contact potential participants.

Phase two: July 1998:

- Carrying out the field study.
- Continuing the literature search.

Phase three: August-October 1998:

- Consolidation and analysis and final consultation with other researchers.
- Preparation of a report for ANTA and preparation of one or more papers for dissemination through a publication program of the CRLRA and/or referred journals.

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